

NEWS

Digital predators, teen victims, Part 2: After sexual assault, a life is shattered



A sexual assault is only the beginning of trauma. Victims often face shattered lives, but little by little many also learn to rebuild. (Illustration by Jeff Goertzen, Orange County Register/SCNG)



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“Because of you, my trust in others is broken. Because of you, I close everyone off and I can’t bring myself to open up to anyone anymore,” she writes in her Victim Impact Statement. “Think about all the girls you hurt.”

It is a passionate, powerful and heart-wrenching declaration. Yet perhaps the most tragic point comes a little later when she says the hurt never goes away, that there will be “pain for days, weeks, months and even years.”

You’ve heard the old saw that our criminal justice system favors the criminal, not the victim. That’s debatable. But it’s clear that in its current state, justice – at best – is a long and winding road for sex assault victims.

By the time she faces her assailant in court for the sentencing, the girl we’ll call Jane Doe already has endured a tortured journey of 33 months.

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Consider that soon after the then-15-year-old is sexually assaulted in her home by an online predator, she must be examined for sexually transmitted diseases. Yet even that day quickly fades into the maelstrom that follows.

While her assailant, then 18, reports online that his parents have taken away his smartphone – a tool he used to lure others, according to court records – Jane Doe’s life begins to slip away.

Advised by the courts not to discuss her case, friends start dropping away as Jane Doe – her name is masked here because she’s a minor as well as a sexual assault victim – changes from a happy, hard-charging soccer player to a quiet and depressed girl.

She isolates herself. She loses friends. Her grade point average, critical for college admission, plummets from 3.4 to 2.1.

As with many assault victims – especially young ones who are still trying to sort out the world – Jane can't climb out of her deep well of depression.

Fortunately, with much therapy, family support and after many months, she comes to find solace in the fact that she is not alone.

"I have learned that 83 percent of rape victims experience this embarrassment," she writes in her Victim Impact Statement, "feeling ashamed and having the feeling that it is their fault for being sexually assaulted."

Still, the damage continues. While Jane Doe struggles to put her life back together, her assailant is out on bail, attends college, works at a grocery store, plays soccer.

Finally, the defendant, Christian Callahan, is convicted of four felonies and two misdemeanors involving four victims over a half-year.

Through his attorney, Jeremy Goldman, Callahan declines to comment for this series.

During Callahan's sentencing in mid-September, Jane Doe is too broken to read. Still, her Victim Impact Statement is heard.

"You ruined each one of our childhoods," a victim's advocate reads. "You stole the most precious years of a girl's life.

"Those are the years when girls have their first crushes, their first dates, their first everything, but not their first and last assault."



Christian Callahan

Deep trauma

To increase those odds as well as to thread their way through a sometimes mysterious system, Jane Doe's parents hire a victim's rights attorney and drive 6,500 miles over nearly three years to meet with doctors and counselors.

They also attend 26 court proceedings.

During one early court hearing, Jane's mother spots the defendant sitting in the hallway. Her ire flares. She tells her husband she is going to say something. He advises her to keep quiet.

Mom, head of a large corporation, walks by Callahan, stops and turns. "You've messed with the wrong family."

Callahan looks up. "Excuse me?"

In the war for justice, it is barely a skirmish. But when it comes to protecting and defending your daughter, sometimes a skirmish is all you get.

And sometimes, if you wait long enough, you get more.



Michael Fell. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Michael Fell is a former deputy district attorney, where he was a specialist in sex crimes. Since leaving the Orange County DA's office a decade ago, he has worked as a criminal lawyer and a victim's rights attorney.

Fell explains part of his job is helping families navigate what can be a daunting, complex and sometimes baffling legal system. Another responsibility is talking to detectives, prosecutors and anyone else who might help.

In separate interviews, I suggest to both Fell and Jane Doe's parents — who have spent thousands of

Mom and Dad say it was worth the money and explain Fell helped them find firmer footing when dealing with the criminal justice system.

For his part, Fell calls the lead detective on the Callahan case as well as the prosecutors “class A” people. Still, as an attorney with a voice of record in courtrooms, he explains, he can bring out issues that might not otherwise be addressed.

When it appeared that the process dragged on unnecessarily, for example, Fell explained the reasons to Jane Doe’s parents. Rather than foot-dragging, detectives were pursuing other leads.

When a seemingly never-ending series of assistant district attorneys were switched out – five in Jane Doe’s case – Fell could explain why that particular unit has turnover.

Regardless, the ordeal is brutal and every day impacts Jane Doe and her family.

“This goes beyond anything you can put in writing,” Dad allows. “It permeates every aspect of your life. The time alone is astronomical. There’s also an emotional and physical toll. You suffer in silence.

“As a family, we’ve lost three years.”

Moving forward

Vanessa Reyna is assault services director for the Orange County nonprofit called “Waymakers,” an organization connected with the DA’s office as well as with law enforcement.



Vanessa Maldonado Reyna (Photo by Paul Bersebach, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Some victims contact Waymakers directly (the 24-hour hotline is 714-957-2737). Other victims first call law enforcement who, in turn, contact victim assistance.

From rape kit through sentencing, there are tortured feelings, hurdles upon hurdles, defense delays, Reyna advises. Most cases take two to three years before they reach conclusion.

Yet perseverance matters, Reyna stresses. Staying with the process can not only result in a conviction, it can empower victims.

Support, she explains, includes helping victims affirm their feelings – almost any reaction is considered normal – ensuring there is adequate food, shelter and safety, that friends and family are available.

If a victim contacts law enforcement within the first five days, Reyna notes, there is a good chance an exam will find DNA that can help a court case. Even after five days, exams can be helpful.

Sadly, many victims wait days, weeks, even months – or years – before they report or share with friends that they were assaulted. According to California's [Megan's Law website](#) the reasons vary.

"Victims may want to deny the fact that someone they trusted could do this to them," Megan's Law experts state. "They may want to just put it behind them; they may believe the myth that they caused the assault by their behavior; or they may fear how other people will react to the truth."

Fortunately, advocates also reinforce a victim's strengths and abilities.

One victim shared that after her case was over, "It was like I just took a backpack of bricks off my back."

Another victim, Reyna says, sobbed violently after her assailant was sentenced, yet later managed to smile and say, "I'm ready to go home."

"Overcoming trauma," Reyna says, "means understanding the process of feelings, what the body is doing, validating that you're not broken."

Certain myths, however, can make understanding trauma even more challenging.

We often are told that there are two responses in an attack: fight or flight. But there is a third response called "freezing."

In sexual assault cases – especially one in which the perpetrator is known – it is common for the victim to "freeze."

Freezing, Jane Doe allows, is what happened to her.

To protect mind and body, Reyna explains, a chemical in the brain can command the body to stop moving. Sometimes the mind races; sometimes there is disassociation to the point where victims report out-of-body experiences. Some even feel they are watching their own assault.

During her assault, Jane Doe reports she survived by focusing on a digital clock and its glowing lines that formed numbers. Now, she can't bear to look at such clocks.

“Lying motionless, offering no verbal consent, not showing expression means you didn’t say ‘yes,’” Reyna points out. She adds involuntary freezing is especially common among teens and young adults.

Even after a court case closes, processing sexual assault continues, Reyna says. She likens it to a scar after a bad wound.

Victims usually “need to integrate the experience into their lives,” Reyna offers. “To get their lives back, they need to find a new normal.

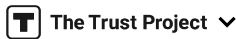
“You’re not broken, your life doesn’t end, but you become a survivor.”

“Resiliency is so admirable,” she emphasizes. Victims become “the strongest of warriors.”

As we talk about what being a warrior means, the final words of Jane Doe’s Victim Impact Statement grow ever louder in my mind.

“As a registered sex offender,” she wrote to her assailant, a status confirmed by the District Attorney’s office, “you will carry this dark secret forever.”

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